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SUBJECT: MEPI LESSONS LEARNED 3: PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

REF: A. TUNIS 1259  
[1](#)B. TUNIS 1263

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Sensitive but Unclassified. Handle Accordingly.

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Summary  
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[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: Since MEPI's launch in 2002, we have learned a great deal about public-diplomacy efforts towards reformers in the Arab world. Building trust and name recognition has required on-the-ground engagement by posts and the MEPI Regional Office. The primary challenges have been identifying our target audience, developing appropriate tools to get the word out, and getting the "reform" message right. To date, we have made great strides in reaching MEPI's natural constituency - reformers - and maintaining a relationship with them, most recently through enhanced alumni activities. We have not, however, taken a consistent PD approach on MEPI aimed at the general public in the region. There are pros and cons to doing so, as well as resource implications. Given MEPI's considerable PD potential, we should take a country-by-country approach to exploiting this untapped source. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (U) This is the third in a series of cables by the MEPI Regional Office in Tunis, based on three years of supporting MEPI activities from Morocco to Lebanon. The others are:

- Overview (ref a)
- Addressing the challenges (ref b)
- Small Grants: The Secret Weapon (septel)

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The Audience  
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[1](#)3. (SBU) While Public Diplomacy is not MEPI's priority mission, we have been successful in outreach efforts to our natural constituency: current and future reformers. Within civil society across the region, MEPI has developed high and generally positive name recognition. Achieving this success has meant adapting our approach and learning as we go. Early on we saw that overcoming skepticism about our goals would require persistent engagement and building up trust. This was one of the primary motivations for opening MEPI Regional Offices (ROs) in Abu Dhabi and Tunis, to establish an on-the-ground presence dealing full-time with reform issues and programs.

[1](#)4. (SBU) The first challenge was to identify local partners whose reform activities we could support. This required

considerable outreach efforts by posts and the RO, as many existing contacts turned out to be seeking funds for projects that did not fit MEPI's objectives, such as one-off conferences or provision of social services. Posts cast their net wider, the RO used visits to meet new civil society contacts and even held seminars in three countries to explain MEPI's objectives and how to apply for a grant. Over time, as posts became more familiar with NGOs and the NGOs with MEPI, we have been much more effective at identifying hundreds of individuals and groups to participate in, or implement, MEPI programs.

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The Medium  
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15. (SBU) The second challenge was getting the word out about MEPI opportunities and accomplishments. In 2006, the RO launched a website with information geared to the countries in the region and 100% mirrored in Arabic and French - essentially 3 parallel websites, a first for the Department. The site ([www.mepimedregion.mepi.state.gov](http://www.mepimedregion.mepi.state.gov)) not only provides material on MEPI programs, but is also constantly updated with funding opportunities, human impact stories, and articles on democratic reform. To ensure that the website was used, the RO began to reach out electronically to its target audience and draw them into the website. The RO now sends a monthly "electronic journal" to some 1,500 contacts. Its articles and other information are linked to the website, which results in three times as many hits in the days after the e-journal's release than during the rest of the month.

16. (SBU) It took us two years of trial and error to reach this point. When the RO opened three years ago, there was very little material on MEPI and almost none of it was in Arabic or French. In 2005, we began by developing fact sheets and information packets in those two languages plus

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English to explain MEPI's broad objectives. Posts appreciated having something to share with potential MEPI partners and host governments, yet told us this general information was of limited use; what was really needed to spread the message was country-specific material. That led us to the website, which is the most effective tool developed so far, justifying the considerable effort required to maintain it. The RO plans to continue making the website more attractive and interactive.

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The Message  
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17. (SBU) The third, and perhaps the hardest, challenge is getting our message right. While there is clearly a growing understanding of, and hunger for, democratic practices across the region, they are usually not expressed in broad, sweeping terms, but rather in more concrete ways of addressing daily problems. In other words, "freedom, democracy or rule of law," are harder concepts to grasp for most people than "government corruption, equal access to jobs or fair treatment by judges," even if the latter are just examples of the former. Arab opponents of reform frequently deride the term "democracy" as a Western model being imposed on Arab society. They also usually paint USG democracy-promotion efforts as part of a grand conspiracy linked to other policies unpopular in the region. However specious, these arguments have resonance with a large segment of the population, even among liberal reformers.

18. (SBU) We have found no magic lexicon to address this challenge. Hot-button words vary by country, as do examples of democratic practices that have resonance. In general, people respond well to specific examples of activities that have an impact on the daily lives of individuals they can relate to. The key is to find terms that reinforce the ideas

that democratic development is taking place, that it is not being imposed from the outside but is home-grown, and that expanding democracy ultimately leads to concepts that are genuinely shared by our different cultures, such as justice and security.

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Reformers or General Public?  
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¶9. (SBU) When we made initial visits across the region after opening the MEPI Regional Office three years ago, most activists and reformers met us with skepticism - when they met us at all. The reasons for their reticence varied: doubts about USG sincerity on reform; objections to certain policies; fear of being tarnished, or endangered, by association. Our persistent engagement, with a consistent message and concrete program support, turned that around. It's not that the reformers now agree with all US policies, but they have concluded that we share a common interest in promoting democratic change. The bottom line is that a lot of groups who avoided us in the past are now coming to us with ideas for reform projects for which they are seeking MEPI support.

¶10. (SBU) We need to consolidate existing relationships with reformers and to continue outreach, especially outside of capitals. Maintaining contact with participants and grantees after their MEPI programs have ended is crucial to our efforts. The creation of MEPI Alumni Associations in several pilot countries should go a long way in ensuring both that posts maintain contact with the growing list of participants and that the alumni involved in different aspects of reform in their country are exposed to each other.

¶11. (SBU) Given the success in outreach to the "reform" community, the question remains whether MEPI PD efforts should more consistently target the general public. The numerous MEPI activities across the region offer great potential to demonstrate concrete USG support for positive change. But there are potential hazards as well. Publicizing MEPI support of activities in politically sensitive areas, such as the media or political parties, can potentially undermine their impact. We have seen examples in several countries of spurious media coverage of MEPI-funded activities that made accusations about the independence/loyalty of the local implementer and/or "meddling" by the USG in internal affairs. Therefore, great care must be taken in selecting which activities to publicize. We should adopt a country-by-country approach toward PD efforts related to MEPI, perhaps as part of the democracy-strategy process. This would allow all interested

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parties to discuss the pros and cons, as well as the resource implications, and decide which activities to promote. There should be no illusions. Publicizing MEPI events will not quickly win over the person in the street, but it will let him or her see another facet of USG policy in the region, one which has a positive impact on real people.

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